

~ Second Wind ~

By Kim Baldwin © 2004

Dedicated to the Queen of the Double Standard

This story follows "[Blown Away](#)" and "[Fire and Ice](#)" and will make more sense if you read those first!

"You've invited *how* many people?" Erin Richards went white and fell back onto the nearest wicker chair.

Gable McCoy froze for a moment where she was, a mug of coffee in each hand. Apparently she'd come to yet another hurdle in the road to their long-anticipated wedding.

Erin had finally accepted her proposal two months ago, and they had decided on a late April wedding on Gable's porch, when their surroundings would be awash with the vivid mix of iridescent greens that herald the return of spring to the north woods. They would marry on the one-year anniversary of the day they met, when a twister took Erin's home and brought Gable to her rescue.

This warm March day they had decided the porch was an appropriate place to begin nailing down the details of the big event, but Gable's revelation about her side of the guest list had gotten things off to an inauspicious start.

Since their relationship seemed to be fraught with unexpected perils, she wanted to take no chances on everything going well.

Gable settled into the chair beside Erin's and set their mugs down on a small glass-topped table between them. "I said I've got 25 to 30 people coming," she repeated. "Is that a problem?"

"I thought we decided on a simple ceremony," Erin said. "Intimate. Just family."

"Everyone I'm inviting IS family, Erin," she explained in a gentle voice as she studied the redhead's face. This wasn't good. Gable thought Erin had worked through her issues about marriage, thanks to some weekly sessions with a counselor. But her lover was clearly distressed about the idea of sharing their big day with a couple dozen of Gable's kin.

"You told me you have eight brothers," Erin said, "But I thought most of 'em lived far away. And how does 8 turn into 30?"

"Well, there are 8 wives. And I have to invite Aunt Norma Jean. And, let's see, I think I counted 26 nieces and nephews in all...but only about half are likely to come. Some are in college, or can't get away."

Erin rubbed at her temples with both hands as if she'd suddenly developed a splitting headache. "Isn't this Aunt the one you told me about? Who just doesn't get it and keeps asking when you're going to 'settle down with a good man?'"

"Well, she's old-fashioned and extremely forgetful," Gable said. "But I promised Mom I'd include her in family things. She'll be O.K., you just have to take her with a grain of salt."

"And you're *sure* all your brothers and their wives are coming?"

Gable nodded. "I told you we're a close family. I'll always be the kid sister they have to watch out for."

Erin groaned. "Oh God. I remember now. You told me stories about how overprotective they got after your father passed away. How they'd all gang up on your dates and interrogate the poor things about their intentions..." A shudder went through the redhead. "I thought the stories were funny when I was hearing them. But I never dreamed they'd become my in-laws." Her eyes got big again. "And that I'd meet them on my wedding day!"

"Don't worry. They've mellowed with age," Gable said. "Most of them, anyway. Grant, he's still a bit..." her voice trailed off. "Well, he can be overbearing, but he means well." She was mumbling now, almost to herself. She was only just now really picturing what her brothers might do to complicate their wedding. *Dear God, what have I done?*

Gable dearly loved her brothers. But some of them did have a tendency to turn parties into memorable melees. The police had been called on more than one occasion, in fact. *How did I forget that?*

"Gable?" Erin interrupted her reverie. "You were saying?"

Gable cleared her throat. "I'm sorry, Erin. I guess I should have talked about it with you before I said anything to them. But Stewart called me the other day, and, well, I told him. And then he called Grant, and Grant called Tracy, and Tracy called Wayne..."

"I get the picture," Erin sighed.

Gable leaned over and took Erin's hand. "Having second thoughts?"

"No, not at all," Erin squeezed her hand reassuringly. "I'm just a little freaked about so many people coming. I figured we'd just have a handful; in fact, I hadn't planned on inviting anyone but Mom." The redhead leaned back in her chair and seemed to relax a little. She kicked off her shoes and put her feet up on the low bench that surrounded the screened in porch. "They're your family and they're welcome, Gable. I'm just going to be even more nervous, that's all." She took a sip of coffee.

"I'll talk to each of them before they get here, make sure they're on their best behavior," Gable promised. "No daring each other to do crazy things, no stunts, no pranks, no drunken brawls..."

her list ended abruptly when Gable noticed her lover was staring at her, wide-eyed, unblinking.

"Pranks?" Erin squeaked in a voice an octave higher than normal. "Brawls? You're kidding, right? Tell me you're kidding, Gable."

"Well, they are *men*, honey. And brothers. And Irish. So they do like a beer now and then, and they can get a little loud and riled up sometimes. Ever see the movie *The Quiet Man*?"

Erin's eyes got even bigger. "You mean the one where John Wayne dukes it out with some guy over Maureen O'Hara's dowry?"

Gable nodded. "It was Mom's favorite. She said it brought up fond memories of growing up in Ireland. And she said the Barry Fitzgerald character was the spitting image of her grandfather, down to his fondness for a pint or two."

"Ah, so that accounts for brothers Wayne and Fitzgerald?"

"Yup. Two from one movie."

"Do we really have to worry about what they might do?" Erin's posture was still rigid with tension.

"Kelly and Flynn were pretty wild when they were younger. And they can all get a bit obnoxious when one or the other claims they can do anything better than the others," Gable admitted. "They're very competitive. But that was back when we were growing up and all under the same roof. They're good guys, really. You'll see." Gable could see Erin was still anxious about the prospect of so many relatives descending upon them.

"Do you think they'll like me?"

This is what's really going on, Gable thought. Erin was afraid her overprotective siblings wouldn't accept her. "Of course! I've told them how wonderful you are and how happy you make me," Gable said. "And every one of them is anxious to welcome you into the family. Honest."

"I hope so," Erin admitted. "I'd hate for anything to mess up our big day. Do you think we're tempting fate by having it on the same day the tornado hit?"

"We can still change that if you want to," Gable said. "Frankly, I was a little surprised when you suggested it. That was such a terrifying, awful day for you."

Erin cocked her head. "Well, it *was* that, I'll grant you. But it was an experience that taught me a lot about myself. And most important of all, it was the day I got my greatest blessing. You." She smiled at Gable with eyes moist with emotion. "So it seems right to pick it as the day to celebrate our love."

Gable nodded, her own heart pounding with the depth of feeling between them. She leaned

toward Erin to kiss her and Erin started to meet her halfway. But just before she closed the final inches, the redhead paused to add, "Still, it probably wouldn't hurt to have a few four-leaf clovers scattered about...and don't go breaking any mirrors..."

The big day finally arrived and Gable was in a near state of panic. Her house was awash with relatives, but there was still no sign of Erin. She glanced at her watch. 58 minutes to go.

She closed her eyes and tried to take deep even breaths to calm her racing heart. She had a massive fluttering of butterflies in her stomach and her collar was choking her. She went to look at herself in the mirror above her dresser and smiled nervously in approval.

Gable smoothed the front of her shirt with slightly moist palms. It was hunter green with tortoise shell buttons; not the dressiest in her wardrobe, but Erin's favorite. The color looked good on Gable and the shirt was made of a buttery soft cotton that invited touching. She plucked a couple of loose cat hairs from her sleek black pants and glanced toward the TV.

The Weather Channel radar indicated little spot showers were beginning to pop up here and there over Michigan as two fronts came together. It was sunny out her bedroom window and there were no weather advisories for the state, but she couldn't help be a bit uneasy. It was an unusually warm afternoon for this early in the spring, just as it had been one year ago.

She glanced at her watch again. 56 minutes.

There was a knock at the door. "Gable?"

Right on cue, Gable thought. "C'mon in, Grant."

The door opened and her eldest brother stuck his head in the door. He whistled approvingly and stepped into the room, his six-foot-three frame filling the doorway as he passed through it. "Nice, Sis. You clean up real good."

"Thanks, Grant. You here for Dad's traditional 'Do you know what you're doing?' speech?"

Grant smiled, displaying crooked teeth, and shook his head. "Not with you, Gable. You've always had more sense than the rest of us. I trust you know you're making the right choice."

Gable didn't try to mask her shock. "Well that's a surprise, coming from you," she said. They all teased Grant about his tendency to be a bit of a know-it-all; and he *was* the most conservative of the clan. She had told him years ago she was gay, and he had seemed okay with it, but they rarely discussed it and she wasn't *really* sure how he would react to the wedding.

"The boys briefed me on what to say," he admitted with a wry grin. "Or should I say, they threatened me with certain...painful physical repercussions...if I were to mention any misgivings at all, or lack of full support for this union. Not that I planned any, mind you. If Erin's

everything you say she is, you're damn lucky to get her, I say. Speaking for all of us, we wish you both every happiness."

Gable gave him a big hug. "Thanks, Grant," she whispered, her voice husky with emotion.

"Just be happy," he replied. He looked down at her. "Seriously, is there anything I can do?"

She shook her head. "Nope, just keep Wayne and Fitz from eating all the food, will you?"

"You don't ask for much, do you? I make no promises," he replied as he headed for the door.

She glanced at her watch again. 52 minutes. *Crap*. She debated with herself only a moment before she reached for the phone and dialed Erin's cell phone. Erin picked up on the fifth ring.

"Hello?" Erin sounded harried and slightly out of breath.

Gable's heartbeat kicked up a notch.

"Everything all right?"

"Hi honey," Erin replied. "Stop worrying, I'll be there. Mom and I are just having a little trouble catching our little ring bearer. He's up in the rafters again."

Oh Shit. "I want Earl to be there as much as you do, Erin, but we *can* get married without him," Gable said.

"Except that I already fastened the rings to his collar, so we'd have to get married without those too."

Crap. Crap. Crap. "Want me to come over to help catch him?"

"You know I don't want you to see me before the ceremony," Erin said. "Not that I'm superstitious, but with our track record, it can't hurt to be a little...prudent?"

Gable laughed. "Well, I can't really disagree with you there," she admitted.

"Leave it to me," Erin said. "We'll be there before you know it. But I really gotta run now or I will be late."

"I'll let you go then," Gable said. She took a deep breath. "See you soon."

"Stop worrying. I'll be there, come hell or high water," Erin said.

"Oh for God's sake, don't say that!" Gable said with feigned horror.

Erin chuckled. "Nothing could keep me from you, Gable. Nothing."

"That's what I want to hear," Gable said. "Drive safe. See you soon."

When the call disconnected, Gable glanced at her watch again. She groaned. *Well that took up another three whole minutes.*

There was another knock at the door. "Gable? Got a minute?" Carl Buckman's voice. A poker buddy to both women, he was the only non-family invited to the wedding. Erin had asked him if he'd escort her down the aisle.

"C'mon in, Carl."

Gable had never seen Carl in much of anything but flannel shirts and blue jeans; he ran a bait and tackle shop when he wasn't acting as the local 911 Director. But today he was immaculately groomed and decked out in a nice blue suit, freshly pressed, with a white shirt and maroon tie. His ever-present baseball cap was missing, and he'd gotten a haircut.

"Hey Carl, don't you look spiffy," Gable teased.

"You don't look so bad yourself, gal. Any idea when Erin's gonna get here?"

"Soon, I hope. But she hasn't left her house yet. Do me a favor and watch for her, will you? Get her into the guest room and keep my brothers from ganging up on her until after the ceremony."

"Will do," he said. He paused in the doorway. "Thanks for including me, Gable."

"You've been a good friend to both of us, Carl. We're glad you're here."

Gable paced for another half-hour until she heard the distinctive sound of Erin's pickup in the driveway. She opened the door and peeked out into the hallway. She could hear a loud chorus of voices from the living room; boisterous laughter. "Stewart?" she hollered. Of all her brothers, Gable was closest to the rail-thin history professor who lived within driving distance in Kalamazoo. He was nearest Gable in age and temperament as well, and utterly dependable.

In a moment, Stewart appeared in the hallway outside the bedroom. Three-year-old niece Audrey, Kelly's youngest, was sitting on his shoulders, playing with his hair. "Hey, Gable. Erin and her mom just got here."

"I know. I heard her truck. Listen, will you see that Erin's mom is taken care of? Get her comfortable, save her a nice seat on the porch."

"Leave it to me." He gave her a wink and galloped away, Audrey giggling in delight.

Gable retreated back into the bedroom. *21 minutes.* She pulled a piece of paper from her pocket. She had handled it so much the hand written words were smeared and faded. Her vows. She knew the words by heart, but repeated them anyway. She considered and rejected last minute

changes until before she knew it, she heard music from the other room replace the hum of voices.

Elsa's Procession to the Cathedral, by Wagner. Erin's choice for the first selection, during their entrance.

There was another knock at the door, and Stewart's voice. "It's time."

Gable was surprised at how calm she was at that moment, after so much nervous anxiety all morning. Her palms were dry, her heartbeat strong and steady. She opened the door to find Stewart with an arm extended to escort her; a proud smile on his face and his errant hair combed neatly back into place.

She put her hand through the crook of his elbow and gave it a squeeze. "Thanks for standing up for me," she said.

"Proud that you asked," he replied a little gruffly, his voice choking with emotion. He pulled a handkerchief from his pocket and quickly dabbed at one eye. "Sorry Mom and Dad didn't get to share this with you. They'd have liked Erin."

She nodded and took a deep breath, too overcome for a moment to respond. "Let's go before she changes her mind," she managed, and they stepped through the doorway into the living room.

She glanced at Carl, waiting outside the guest room for Erin, then turned toward the porch. Her assembled kin were staring at her through the window, all smiling their encouragement. The smile that touched her the most, however, was the one on the face of the only stranger—an elderly version of Erin except for the snow-white hair.

Gable was so intent on the guests that she didn't hear it right off.

The blare of an emergency radio from behind her, competing with the London Symphony Orchestra CD.

She whirled around.

Carl grabbed for the radio at his belt just as the door beside him opened and Erin appeared. The redhead frowned and stared at the radio.

Gable inhaled sharply, the alarm momentarily forgotten.

Erin was breathtaking; her coppery hair cut in a slightly tousled shag for the occasion. She wore a loose-fitting cream shirt over matching pants, accented by a delicate emerald necklace and matching earrings; wedding gifts from Gable. Her eyes were shining and her cheeks flushed pink in the excitement, and despite the anxiety etched on her face at the moment, Gable thought she'd never looked more beautiful.

"Don't tell me I'm hearing what I think I'm hearing," Erin moaned.

"It's nothing to worry about," Carl said. The slight tremor in his voice betrayed him, and the others were instantly on alert.

"Just a... a Tornado Watch. Just a *Watch*," he repeated. He listened for a moment with the radio against his ear.

Gable and Erin looked at each other. Erin looked ready to cry.

"Just a *Watch*," he repeated, putting one arm around Erin. "No need to interrupt the ceremony."

"Shall we get started?" Gable asked Erin.

The redhead nodded and seemed to relax under Gable's calm demeanor.

Gable glanced at her brother, then Carl. "Tell you what, guys. I'd like to escort Erin the rest of the way myself, if you don't mind. Would you join the others and wait for us outside?"

"Don't blame you there, Sis," Stewart said. He gave Gable a peck on the cheek before crossing to Erin to repeat the gesture. "Welcome to the family, Erin," he whispered before withdrawing, his easy smile eerily reminiscent of Gable's.

"Thank you, Stewart," Erin replied.

"Good luck you two. You really do belong together," Carl said, before he too gave each a quick kiss and joined the others on the porch.

Gable took Erin's hand and gave it a squeeze. "Ready?"

Erin nodded. "Ready, willing and able," she whispered, looking up at Gable. "Thanks for waiting."

"Whatever you need. I just want you to be happy," Gable said.

"You make me happy, Gable. Happier than I ever dreamed I could be."

"That makes two of us," Gable said. She leaned down to give Erin a quick kiss.

They turned to face the porch, and the assembled guests who'd been watching them burst into applause.

"Is that it?" Gable's elderly Aunt Norma Jean hollered over the din. "Is it over? I couldn't hear a thing!"

The rest of them started laughing, Gable and Erin too, as they made their way onto the porch just as the sun was beginning to set.

The setting was perfect. The air was scented with lilacs, and hints of the other flowering plants and shrubs that Gable had placed around her home. The sky was streaked with crimson hues that reflected like alpenglow onto the trees surrounding the cabin.

Ruby-throated hummingbirds, newly returned from their winter migration, raced noisily between the feeders dangling off the porch as the music faded and those assembled fell silent.

A loud *ROWL!* broke the quiet and Gable's brother Mason stepped forward, holding a rather terrified Earl Grey firmly between two big hands. Gable was glad they had remembered to clip the kitty's razor sharp nails the night before.

"Wants his mommies," Mason whispered nervously, holding the cat out to Erin amid giggles from the crowd.

"C'mere you little ring bearer," Erin cooed, cradling Earl against her. He started purring at once, but remained on high alert, eyeing the strangers around them warily as his tail twitched back and forth like a metronome.

"Any time you're ready, Maggie," Erin said to a middle-aged woman with graying hair who stood off to one side. The Reverend Maggie Randolph was attached to a Unitarian church in Lansing that Erin had attended while getting her Masters degree at Michigan State.

"Ladies and Gentlemen, thank you for coming to share this special day with Gable and Erin," the Reverend began. "They have come to declare their love and commitment to each other, before you, and before God. They've written their own vows."

Gable and Erin faced each other and joined hands.

Gable felt a little weak in the knees, and was grateful for Erin's firm grip. She began her vows with a poem she had memorized as a teenager; wistfully longing for the day it might come true.

*"Oh the comfort, the inexpressible comfort
Of feeling safe with a person
Having neither to weigh thoughts, nor measure words
But pouring them all right out, just as they are,
Chaff and grain together,
Certain that a faithful hand will take them and sift them,
Keep what is worth keeping, and with a breath of kindness blow the rest away.*"*

You are the kindest woman I've ever met, Erin.
With the gentlest soul, the most giving heart.
I give thanks every day that God brought us together.
I promise to love you and cherish you, and be faithful to you,
In sickness and in health, for richer or poorer, as long as we both shall live.
I will try every day to make you feel deeply and unconditionally loved and respected, as you

make me feel every moment, even when we are apart.
Thank you for loving me."

Erin wiped at tears and struggled for the composure she needed to recite her own vows.

"Me too. Ditto. Same back acha. What you said," Erin began. Everyone cracked up, Gable most of all. Erin blushed. "I had to say that," she explained to their guests. "Gable's always kidding me about my inability to always put my feelings into words, you see." That got another laugh.

The redhead took a deep breath. "There are many things I love about you, Gable. Not the least of which is the way we can make each other howl with laughter several times a day."

Gable nodded her agreement as Erin continued.

"I love your selfless spirit; your commitment to give back to your community. You inspire me to want to be the best person I can be. I love the thoughtful touches that accompany everything you do. The fresh sprig of lavender left on my pillow. Coming home from work to find you'd mowed my lawn, or fixed me a special romantic dinner. You find a million ways every day to tell me I'm special, and to show me how much I am loved. I'll never ever be able to really tell you how much I need you, admire you, and simply adore you. But I promise to try, every day of our lives together. To honor you and cherish you, in sickness and in health, rich and poor, young and old, as long as the Good Lord gives us."

The wind began to pick up around them. Gable heard a faint rumble of thunder in the distance. She pretended not to notice.

"The rings?" prompted the Reverend.

Gable reached up to untie the small silk bundle wrapped in Earl Grey's collar. Inside were matching rings; plain gold bands inscribed with their initials and the date. Gable placed Erin's on her left ring finger.

"With this ring I thee wed," Gable recited. "Wear it always as a symbol of our love and commitment to each other."

Erin placed Gable's on her finger and repeated the vow, unable to keep her voice from breaking at the end.

"Please join me in helping Erin and Gable celebrate their union," the Reverend Maggie intoned, leading off a round of applause as the couple kissed.

They were immediately engulfed by Gable's clan, hugged from all directions by six-foot brothers and five-foot wives and a variety of nieces and nephews around their knees and ankles.

It was a perfect moment, but it didn't last long.

Carl's voice cut through the clamor. "Tornado Warning! Everyone into the basement!"

There was a moment of stunned silence, broken finally by Erin's resigned "Oh Hell. You heard him. Let's go, everybody."

The brothers and their wives offered hugs and congratulations as they made their way to the narrow stairs at the back of the house, and Fitz, Flynn and Tracy detoured briefly en route to pick up folding chairs and beer. Gable's small basement was built to house her furnace and water heater, certainly not a bounty of wedding guests. But the McCoys let nothing spoil a good celebration. They were jammed in together pretty tight, it was true, but not so much that anyone was truly uncomfortable in the short term.

Unless of course, they were claustrophobic.

Erin lingered at the door with Gable trying to calm Earl Grey, who wanted no part of the solid wall of human flesh before him. He pushed off from Erin's shoulder in a frenzied leap for freedom and disappeared up the stairs.

"I know how he feels," Erin admitted, glancing toward the crowded basement. "Gable, I can't go in there."

Carl came down the steps toward them, shaking his head. "Unbelievable. A twister was just sighted about ten miles south of here," he informed them. "You two better get inside, it's really starting to blow out there."

"I'm not going in there without you," Gable announced as Carl jammed in with the others. "We're joined together now, have you forgotten already?" She said this with a smile, because she knew Erin was only gathering her nerve.

"I was kind of afraid you'd say that." Erin sighed. She took a couple of deep breaths. She was trembling. "I call the spot nearest the door," she said unnecessarily.

"Of course," Gable replied, hugging her. "You can do this. It won't be long."

"Keep telling me that, won't you?" Erin whispered. "Keep me distracted? I don't want to freak out in front of your family."

They joined the others just in time to hear Erin's mother announce the rather bawdy punch line to some joke involving an Irishman and the pope, which evoked raucous gales of laughter from the McCoy brothers.

"Mother!" Erin reprimanded. "There are children present!"

"Pish posh, dear," Louise Richards replied. "Loosen up a little."

"Hey, pass me one of those," Kelly called to Flynn, who was tearing into a carton of Guinness

Ale.

"I'd like one too, if you please," Erin's mother said.

"Certainly, Ma'am," Flynn answered, passing one down her way. "Sorry we didn't bring glasses."

"None needed, dear boy," Louise Richards answered. She popped the top and took a delicate sip. "Actually, I prefer it this way."

"We should have known better than to trust the boys to get the beverages," Kelly's wife Carol said. "I don't suppose any of you thought to pick up a bottle of wine? Maybe a soda pop for one of your poor, thirsty children?" She got only the first half of the sentence out before Kelly, Flynn and Stewart went racing back up the steps.

"Why don't I just go and show them where everything is?" Erin said, starting for the door.

"I'm sure they can find everything just fine, honey," Gable said, and it was enough to pull Erin reluctantly back into her seat. The boys were already pounding back down the stairs. They had four bottles of wine and a couple of six packs of soda, and one had also grabbed one of the trays of hors d'oeuvres from the fridge.

"FOOD!" Wayne and Fitz enthused simultaneously as the tray was passed around the room, eager hands plucking up canapés of prosciutto and melon, nut cheese balls, cocktail shrimp, stuffed olives, and tiny Thai spring rolls.

Gable was glad they'd catered the affair; it had minimized some of the stress for the couple, and Erin could use all the help she could get at the moment. The redhead was managing pretty well to disguise her anxiety, but Gable knew how worried and upset she was by the whole situation.

Carl brushed past them, heading for the door. "I'm going to check in and see what's happening," he said, stepping out into the stairwell where he could hear better.

"Maybe I should run upstairs and get more food," Erin said, as the tray made its way around finally to the couple. It was empty.

Gable put her arm around the redhead and leaned in close so she wouldn't be overheard. "I know this is really rough on you, Erin. But we really should stay put until the danger's past."

"I know," Erin sighed, slumping back against Gable. "I guess I shouldn't be too surprised. Nothing for us ever goes smoothly, it seems."

"Some good news," Carl announced to the group as he rejoined them. "That tornado never touched down, and it disappeared after a few minutes. It's still blowing pretty good out there, and the warning won't be lifted for another two hours, so we probably should stay put. But it looks like the worst may be over."

"Two hours?" Erin moaned under her breath. She clasped her hands together in her lap to try to keep them from trembling.

"C'mon, honey," Gable relented. "We'll go upstairs and give you a break and get some of the food. But just for a minute, O.K.?"

Erin bolted out the door without further ado and hurried up the steps. Gable hung back just a moment. The low murmur of voices around them had stopped and her relatives were looking at her expectantly.

"Sorry about this," Gable said. "Erin's not big on small confined spaces anyway, and well...you all know what she's been through. We'll be right back; just going to go upstairs a minute."

She heard Grant's voice as she started up the stairs after Erin. "We'll just have to find a way to distract her then, won't we, lads?"

There was a sharp crack of thunder from very near the house, and the lights flickered for a moment as Gable rounded the corner to the kitchen. Erin was pulling more trays of food out of the fridge. She looked a bit calmer now that she was out of the basement, but Gable could tell the storm was wearing on the redhead's nerves.

"Sorry this is not the perfect day we'd planned," Gable said, coming up behind Erin and hugging her around the waist. She rested her chin on Erin's shoulder. "You doing all right?"

"Hanging in there," Erin sighed. "Just let me escape up here every now and then, and I'll get through. I just hope your brothers and everybody don't think I'm a wacko."

Gable couldn't help smiling. "Honey, I told them all how we met. They understand."

"I hope so. Hell of a first impression to make on your in-laws," Erin said.

They lingered upstairs long enough to broil the trays of hot hors d'oeuvres that had been dropped off by the caterers: there were little pigs in blankets and crab puffs and cheese straws, and delicate triangles of phyllo pastry stuffed with spinach and feta.

Erin had seemed to relax a bit during the brief reprieve upstairs, but she tensed up again almost immediately when they went back into the basement.

"SO, Erin," Wayne leaned forward and got the redhead's attention. He had a mischievous twinkle in his eye. "Has Gable shared her middle name with you yet?" The question set off a twittering of giggles from most of the audience.

Gable frowned. "Very funny Wayne. Find something else to talk about."

"You have a middle name?" Erin asked, genuinely curious. Gable had, early on, revealed her mother's propensity for naming all of her children after her favorite actors. But she'd never said

anything about having a middle name.

"Let's talk about this later," Gable said.

"Aw c'mon, Gable," Kelly intoned. "Wasn't it you that told me on my wedding day how important it was to trust each other? To tell each other everything?"

"Hey, she said the same thing to me," Flynn agreed.

"And me," Stewart chimed in.

"Please guys?" Gable whined.

"It can't be *that* bad, can it?" Erin asked, setting off another round of giggles.

Gable might have fought harder to change the subject, but her brothers *had* managed to find a topic that took Erin's mind off of things for a while. The redhead was looking expectantly at her with a bemused grin, one eyebrow raised, awaiting her answer.

"Dad, you see, thought that Mom was a bit frivolous when she wanted to name us all after movie stars," Grant explained. "So he agreed to go along with her choices only on the condition that he got to pick our middle names."

"He wanted to give us names that would inspire us to dream big, and think all things are possible," Tracy interjected. "So he named us all after people he admired. He was big into explorers and pioneers."

"Let me guess," Erin said. "Columbus? Vespucci?"

Gable just shook her head, a bit of a smile beginning to appear at the edge of her mouth.

"Most of them aren't bad at all," Grant said. "I got Lewis, and Mason got Clark."

"I got Scott," Flynn offered.

"And I got Peary," Fitz supplied.

"Mine is Lindberg," Tracy said. "Which was a good thing, really. Got me interested in flying-- I'm the only one in the family with a pilot's license."

"I got Hillary because I was born in 1953," Wayne explained. "Don't think I didn't take a lot of ribbing in school for *that* name."

"I got Glenn because I was born a month after John Glenn went into orbit in 1962," Kelly said.

"I came along a couple of years later. Being Irish-Catholic you know, I had to get Kennedy,"

Stewart supplied.

"I know you were born in '66, right?" Erin asked Gable, who nodded. "What happened in '66?"

"Not much," Grant sniggered.

"I'll have you know that 1966 was the year that gave us...gave us...uh, let's see. Help me out, somebody?" Gable pleaded.

"That was the year that Star Trek started, Aunt Gable," Wayne's 15 year old son Mitch offered, to another round of laughter.

"Thanks a lot Mitch, that's very helpful," Gable deadpanned. "There has to be something else..."

"Don't get off the subject, Sis," Stewart said. "Weren't you about to volunteer your middle name to the woman you just married upstairs?"

Gable glared at Stewart. "Traitor," she said flatly, and everybody laughed again. She took a deep breath and let it out.

"Shackleton," she mumbled.

Titters all around.

"Gable Shackleton McCoy?" Erin giggled, unable to contain herself.

"I was named for Sir Ernest Shackleton, a very heroic figure, as you all know." This last Gable directed at her brothers, who chimed in immediately in agreement.

"Oh, of course," Flynn said.

"Very true," Mason added.

"Saved every one of his men during that long terrible ordeal in Antarctica," Grant nodded solemnly, then cracked up with the rest of them.

"You'll get yours, boys," Gable promised. "Wait and see."

"Erin, dear," Louise Richards interrupted. "You *have* told Gable about *your* name, haven't you?"

The room fell silent. All eyes turned to Erin's mother, who was sipping her Guinness contentedly, enjoying her moment in the spotlight. "Erin's her middle name, you know. She was named after her great-grandfather on her father's side, who fought in the Civil War."

"Erin is your middle name?" Gable repeated, enjoying the way Erin was beginning to squirm.

"Anyone for more beer?" the redhead squeaked, turning a brilliant shade of crimson.

"Erin?" Gable prodded.

"Mother, I'm never going to forgive you for this," Erin said.

"Oh, come on, Erin," Tracy urged.

"We're sworn to secrecy," Fitz encouraged.

"No laughing," Erin pronounced solemnly, looking at each of their faces. But even she couldn't keep from smiling as she finally revealed the truth.

"Peeps."

Everyone howled. But Gable guffawed so loud she embarrassed herself. "Peeps?" she repeated when she could catch her breath. "Peeps as in marshmallow chicks and bunnies?"

"Peeps as in Corporal Dwayne G. Peeps," Erin clarified, unable to stop herself from smiling at Gable's reaction.

"Oh my, that IS bad," Gable said. "Shackleton seems kind of tame by comparison." She turned to her mother-in-law. "That was kind of cruel, wasn't it, Louise?"

"Her Dad's idea," the elderly woman said. "He thought it was cute. But then again, he also liked Lawrence Welk and Michael Bolton. The man had no taste."

Laughter.

"Except in women, of course," Louise added, and they all laughed harder. "But he was a lovely man, and I indulged him. I let him have his way and then I picked a nice sensible middle name for our daughter," she concluded.

"Indeed you did," Gable seconded, giving Erin a kiss on the cheek. "We have equal blackmail on each other, you know. I won't use yours if you don't use mine."

"Deal!" Erin said.

"Speak for yourself, you two. What's to say we're going to be able to resist such tempting tease material?" Kelly asked.

Gable smiled sweetly at her brothers. "It *is* my wedding day," she reminded them, "And as I recall, didn't every one of you promise me when I invited you that you'd be on your very best behavior?"

The brothers looked at each other.

"Well..." Stewart began.

"Yeah, I guess," Kelly answered.

"Spoilsport," Flynn added, but all in fun.

It was a teasing camaraderie among the siblings that reminded them all of big family gatherings when they were growing up, and their parents were still alive.

"Remember that Christmas right after Gable was born, when Dad told us if they ever had another baby girl what they were going to name her?" Grant asked.

Mason chortled. "I remember."

Wayne was nodding too.

"I don't remember that," Flynn said.

"Me neither," Kelly said.

"What was it?" Stewart asked.

"McQueen Magellan McCoy," Grant answered.

Chuckles all around.

"He was kidding, surely," Fitz said.

"I dunno. I sure believed it, at the time," Grant stated.

"Me too," Mason said. "But now, I just can't believe they were serious."

They swapped stories about the two clans while they emptied the platters of food and dug into another round of beverages from a loaded cooler two of the men carried downstairs.

One by one, the children fell asleep, cradled in their parents' arms or dozing on blankets laid out on the floor.

Erin yawned, and Gable glanced at her watch. "Holy cow! It's after eleven-the Tornado Watch expired ten minutes ago!" she said.

"You're kidding!" Erin said. "You mean we can finally get out of here?"

"C'mon, everyone, we can get the kids' tucked in," Gable announced. "You're all welcome to stay up and visit, but the happy couple is going to shortly bid you farewell."

Gable and Erin were postponing their honeymoon until after Erin's school adjourned for the summer, but they had decided to spend their wedding night alone at Erin's. Most of Gable's

relatives would overnight in her house, taking up every bed and couch and futon. The overflow was staying at a small motel in town, as was Erin's mother.

"We'll see you all tomorrow for lunch back here," Gable said. "Try not to break anything."

Two of the wives snorted with laughter. Their husbands, Tracy and Morgan, turned red in embarrassment.

Ten minutes later, the newlyweds were in Erin's pickup, headed to her house. Earl Grey was curled up contently on Gable's lap, purring away, glad to be rid of the noisy mob of strangers.

"Sorry we were so late getting away," Gable said. "And that the day hasn't gone quite as we planned. Was meeting my relatives so terrible?"

Erin smiled. "Morgan has your eyes. Kelly, your nose. Grant, your laugh. Flynn and Fitz the same lopsided grin when you're pouring on the charm. I saw something of you in every one of your brothers." She glanced at Gable. "And they couldn't have been sweeter to me, or more welcoming. Quite a family you have there, honey."

"Quite a family *we* have." Gable leaned over and kissed Erin on the cheek.

Erin's smile got bigger. "We have. I stand corrected."

"I'm glad to finally get some time alone with you. Are you tired?"

"I was a little, back at your place. But not now."

"Well that's music to my ears," Gable said, stroking Erin's thigh with her left hand.

"I hope you like what I've done for our wedding night," Erin said, taking one hand off the wheel to caress Gable's arm.

"Oh? What have you done?"

"Just provided a little ambience," Erin said. "Wait and see."

They turned into Erin's driveway.

"That's odd," Erin said, when they came within sight of the house. The place was dark. "I know I left the outside light on. And I thought I left one on inside, too. I hope it's just a burned bulb."

But they realized as soon as they got inside the power was out, and had been out, for several hours.

Erin lit a couple of candles.

"Aw, the champagne is warm," she announced. "And I guess that nice romantic music I had

planned is out as well."

Gable wrapped her arms around Erin and embraced her tightly. "I don't need anything but you, honey."

"I know. The same goes for me. But I wanted it to be special."

"It is special, Erin," Gable tried to reassure her, but she could tell the redhead was deeply disappointed that all her plans had been thwarted by the storm.

"Well at least I've got some comfy new sheets to try out," Erin said as they headed toward the bedroom. "1000 thread count Egyptian cotton."

"Sounds yummy," Gable said.

Erin opened the door and cried out in surprise. A thick branch had come through the window beside the bed, and they could feel the night air blowing into the room.

"Can you believe this?" Erin asked, surveying the damage. The new sheets were filthy, the mattress soaked through from the rain. "What a mess!"

"Do you have a tarp or something to put over the hole?" Gable asked.

"Yeah, there is a big roll of heavy plastic in the garage," Erin said. "And some duct tape, too."

"I'll get that. Why don't you just take care of what you need to tonight and leave this to tomorrow to deal with?"

Erin nodded. "Yeah, I'm with you. I guess we can use the guest room, but the bed in there is awfully small."

Gable hugged Erin and nuzzled her neck. "Don't let it get you down, honey. We'll take care of this."

Gable got the tarp from the garage, but lingered in the kitchen for a moment to make a call from her cell phone. She had to strain to make out the phone number in the dim light of the candle.

By the time she rejoined Erin, the redhead had dried what she could, and the two of them managed to seal up the broken window in short order.

"C'mon, grab what you need for the night," Gable said when they were through. "And your boom box and music."

"Why? Where are we going?" Erin asked.

"You'll see."

They filled Earl's bowls and shut the door to the bedroom so he wouldn't get into the broken glass, then headed back to Erin's pickup.

"So?" Erin asked when she got to the end of the driveway.

"Head north," Gable directed. "I'll tell you when to turn."

Erin never did figure out where they were going, for the Fireside Inn was fairly new and off the beaten path. Gable had happened to see an ad for it somewhere and had taken note because of its amenities: Jacuzzi tubs and all night room service.

Gable was pleased to see the chilled bottle of champagne waiting in their room, along with fresh strawberries dipped in chocolate. She had asked for flowers, too, but that had been an impossible task, given the hour. Still, it had brought the smile back to Erin's face and that was all that mattered.

"This is wonderful. I don't know how you managed it, but I'm glad you did," Erin said, plugging in the boom box. She started a CD they'd both come to love; Rod Stewart singing classic romantic ballads by Cole Porter and George Gershwin.

"Dance with me?" Erin invited, extending her hand.

They came together and the strains and complications of the day melted away.

"We really did it," Erin whispered, her head resting on Gable's shoulder as they swayed to the music, their bodies pressed together.

"We sure did," Gable agreed. "I love you, Erin."

"Same back acha," Erin shot back, and they both giggled.

"I really liked your vows," Gable said sincerely.

"You got me so worked up with yours I had a hard time saying mine," Erin replied, pulling back slightly to look up at Gable. "They were beautiful, love."

"I'm glad you approve," Gable said, stroking Erin's cheek with her fingertips. "I'll never really be able to tell you though, all that you mean to me."

"Well, why don't you show me, then?" the redhead whispered huskily, as her hands came up to cup Gable's breasts. She tugged roughly at the nipples through the thin material as she captured Gable's lips in a searing kiss. Gable felt a surge of liquid heat rush through her and settle between her legs. Erin sure knew how to push her buttons.

"Take me to bed, wife," the redhead urged.

"I like the sound of that," Gable answered, leading Erin to the big four-poster that awaited them.

THE END

*Poem by Dinah Maria Mulock Craik (1826-1887)

Thanks for reading. No portion of this story may be reproduced without permission.

Kim Baldwin © 2004. Feedback welcome. E-mail me at: woodsbard@yahoo.com

For more of my *Forces of Nature* short stories, and information about my novel, *Hunter's Pursuit*, visit my website at : www.geocities.com/woodsbard
